



Balanced Literacy Instruction

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A few years ago, Pressley (1998) wrote a book about elementary-level literacy instruction, *Reading Instruction That Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching*. A main message in that book is that excellent elementary literacy instruction balances skills instruction (e.g., phonics, comprehension strategies teaching) and holistic literacy opportunities (reading of authentic literature, composing in response to text). In making that case, Pressley reviewed substantial evidence validating the positive impacts on literacy achievement of many elements of elementary literacy instruction. He also reviewed evidence that beginning literacy classrooms in which achievement is high are typified by balanced teaching.

The message was strong and clear that the two warring camps in elementary literacy were both wrong. The available evidence favors neither those promoting predominantly skills-focused literacy teaching nor those favoring environments filled with holistic experiences to the exclusion of skills instruction (e.g., whole language).

The term "balance" has definitely caught on. As is often the case, however, many began to wrap themselves in the term without regard to whether their position was consistent with Pressley's (1998) intention in *Reading Instruction That Works*. Thus, in the past several years, many other books have used the phrase "balanced instruction" or some variation of this phrase. Some of these recent books suggest heavy doses of skills, with many pages devoted to conceptualizing, describing, and defending skills instruction while mentioning holistic opportunities only in passing. Others devote many pages to conceptualizing, describing, and defending holistic teaching, and recommend skills instruction as something that can be done in the context of holistic reading and writing and only when the need arises.

We should have anticipated imbalanced conceptions of balanced teaching. Before Pressley wrote the book on balanced literacy instruction, he edited one with

Ellen McIntyre (McIntyre & Pressley, 1996). That text offered a variety of conceptions of balance, from conceptions more heavily favoring skills teaching to those clearly in the whole language camp. That somewhat confusing mishmash of conceptions, in fact, motivated the emphasis in Pressley's subsequent book that balanced instruction really means a lot of skills instruction in the context of massive holistic teaching!

Since his 1998 book, nothing has happened to persuade Pressley that he erred in favoring balanced instruction as conceived in that volume, despite the dual perspectives—those of some skills enthusiasts who believe that balanced instruction is simply whole language in thin disguise and some whole language theorists who view balanced instruction as skills instruction warmed over. As critics took aim, Pressley and his colleagues just kept studying effective and ineffective elementary instruction. Whenever they have found an elementary classroom in which literacy engagement was high, they found balanced teaching as conceived in the 1998 book, as well as evidence that literacy development was on course.

In this chapter, we review the evidence for balanced literacy instruction in the elementary years, focusing especially on recent developments that increase confidence in the 1998 conception. In doing so, we specifically make the case that the balanced instructional model is particularly appropriate and beneficial for students who have initial difficulties in learning to read and write. What will become apparent by the end of the article is that balanced instruction requires knowledge of how to carry out effective skills instruction as well as high awareness of how to teach holistic reading and writing. Balanced classrooms reveal both forms of instruction, teaching that is both complicated and coherent, as well as tailored to the needs of individual students.

BALANCING MANY ELEMENTS OF INSTRUCTION

A central claim made here is that excellent literacy instruction is balanced with respect to skills and holistic components. The following discussion explains how we know this to be the case.

Survey of Nominated-Effective Primary Teachers

Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996) surveyed well-respected primary-grade teachers about their literacy instruction practices. The first challenge was to identify a sample of teachers. To do so, Pressley et al. wrote to 50 reading supervisors across the nation and asked each of them to nominate one kindergarten, one grade-1, and one grade-2 teacher in their district as effective in educating their students to become readers and writers. In general, the supervisors nominated teachers whom they had observed directly and who had excellent reputations with administrators, other teachers, and/or parents as being effective in stimulating literacy development.

In the first phase of the investigation, each nominated teacher was asked to list 10 instructional practices essential to his or her literacy instruction. Teachers who

responded in the first phase mentioned more than 300 different practices. In the second phase of the study, the teachers responded to a more focused questionnaire, which posed one question for each of the 300 practices cited in the first phase of the study, to determine the prevalence of the various practices.

The overarching finding in the study was that these primary-grade teachers did many different things to support and encourage the literacy development of their students. The teachers in this study reported being extremely eclectic in their literacy instruction. Yes, this group favored whole-language principles, with 97% reporting that their instruction reflects at least somewhat the tenets of whole-language instruction. Yet they also reported offering frequent skills instruction, both in the context of actual reading and writing and in lessons in which the skills were isolated and presented in a decontextualized situation.

Their responses did not seem to be consistent with any of the more extreme perspectives that have been offered in the literacy debates of the 20th century. They certainly did not advocate skills-first instruction, nor did their responses reveal anything consistent with a whole-word approach. Their version of whole language was tempered by much attention to skills instruction, although the more committed the teacher was to whole language, the less skills instruction he or she reported.

These teachers were committed to balancing a number of components, some more consistent with whole language and some more consistent with skills instruction. Although a number of primary-level researchers (e.g., Adams, 1990; Cazden, 1992; Delpit, 1986; Duffy, 1991; Fisher & Hiebert, 1990; McCaslin, 1989; Pressley, 1994; Stahl, McKenna, & Pagnucco, 1994) had advocated such balancing before this study appeared, Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996) fleshed out the balancing model. Their teacher reports raised the possibility that the balance model was extremely complicated. Based on Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996), effective curricular balancing is analogous to juggling hundreds of balls in the air. To further complicate this intricate juggling act, the precise balance of balls varies from child to child and situation to situation during the school day.

Followup on Literacy Development

One of the most interesting and surprising findings of the survey of nominated-effective primary-grades teachers was the teachers' reports about teaching struggling beginning readers. Basically, they said that instruction for struggling readers did not differ qualitatively from instruction for their other students. Yes, skills instruction was more extensive and intensive than with normally achieving students, but struggling readers also were immersed in literature and writing experiences.

This finding was intriguing enough to prompt Rankin-Erickson and Pressley (2000) to follow it up. Specifically, the follow-up research surveyed primary-level teachers who are especially concerned with struggling readers—that is, primary-level special education teachers whom their administrators considered to be highly effective in stimulating literacy development. The methodology in the study was similar to the methodology in the Pressley et al. (1996) investigation, with an

open-ended question ("What are the essential elements in your literacy instruction?") followed by a detailed questionnaire asking teachers about each of the instructional practices they mentioned in their open-ended responses.

Just as was the case with the survey of nominated-effective primary-level teachers, the nominated-effective, primary-level special educators mentioned hundreds of specific elements of instruction in their responses to the open-ended question. The second questionnaire tapped 436 instructional practices, as had been the case in the Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996) study.

The most interesting, overarching conclusion of the study was that the instruction reported by the nominated-effective, primary-level special educators was not much different from the instruction reported by the nominated-effective first-grade teachers. They described a great deal of skills instruction in their lessons, but they also reported extensive literature and writing experiences. In general, the explicitness and completeness of skills instruction was reported as increasing with the severity of the students' difficulties in learning to read.

Although some skills instruction was portrayed as decontextualized, most skills instruction was reported to occur in the context of real reading and writing. These teachers were emphatic in stating that whole language and skills instruction are not contradictory but, rather, complementary approaches in their instruction of struggling beginning readers. The teachers reported providing education to students in special education that was not much different from the instruction they provided to other students. The special education students did receive more intensive sound-, letter-, and word-level skills instruction, but they also received the rich mix of literacy experiences that excellent primary-grades general education teachers reported providing to average and above-average students.

Observations of Outstanding Teachers

Pressley and his associates followed up the surveys with observational studies of some outstanding primary-level teachers—in particular, outstanding grade-1 teachers. The observations of classrooms were complemented by interviews. The data were analyzed using a method known as *constant comparison* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The initial result was a detailed summary of the elements of instruction for each classroom in the study and how those elements were related to one another. Then the results for individual classroom were analyzed to generate more general conclusions across classrooms.

Upstate New York Study

In the first such study (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998), administrators and reading specialists in a number of upstate New York school districts were asked to nominate a first-grade teacher in their district whose teaching was considered exemplary in promoting literacy, and another teacher in the district who was considered more typical of the district's grade-1 teachers. When the study began, the

sample consisted of 10 teachers, 5 of whom were nominated as outstanding in promoting their students' literacy and 5 of whom were nominated as more typical.

Several observers made multiple visits to the 10 first-grade classrooms. The visits to a classroom continued until the observers were confident that they were coming to no new insights about what was going on in the classroom. The teacher interviews were driven by the observations. That is, questions were designed to clarify what the observers had seen during the classroom visits, and each interview was tailored to what they had seen in each teacher's own classroom.

As part of the observations, the researchers explicitly looked for indicators of literacy achievement in classrooms, because the researchers did not want to accept the school district's appraisals of teachers as exemplary or more typical without any corroboration. Three indications of achievement characterized classrooms with high literacy achievement compared to those with less achievement:

1. By the end of the study, reading achievement clearly was better in some classrooms than others. That is, in some classrooms most students were reading books at or above grade level by the end of first grade, whereas in other classrooms many students were reading books well below grade level.
2. By the end of the year, writing was more advanced in some classrooms than in other classrooms. In some classrooms most students were writing longer than one-page stories that were reasonably coherent. In these same classrooms, the students' punctuation, capitalization, and spelling were often quite good. In contrast, in the classrooms taught by more typical teachers, the stories were much shorter on average (e.g., perhaps two or three lines long) with less evidence that students understood and correctly used punctuation, capitalization, and spelling conventions.
3. In some classrooms student engagement was much more consistent than in other classrooms (i.e., in some classrooms, more of the students engaged in productive reading, writing, or other academic activity more of the time than in other classrooms). Most striking, classrooms with high reading achievement also showed high writing achievement. Moreover, in the classes with high reading and writing achievement, most students seemed to be working productively on literacy tasks most of the time.

During the course of the study, one teacher dropped out because of personal reasons unrelated to the study, leaving a total of 9 teachers who were observed and interviewed over the course of the year. Of these nine, three stood out in promoting reading achievement, writing achievement, and engagement. (Two of these originally were nominated as outstanding teachers, and one was originally nominated as more typical of his district.) Three teachers stood out as not being as successful as the others in getting their children to read and write and be engaged in literacy activities. Three were in the middle with respect to success in promoting their students' literacy and engagement.

In addition to differences in achievement, some striking differences became apparent in the teaching in classrooms with high achievement on average, especially

relative to the classrooms with low achievement on average. In the three classes in which reading and writing achievement seemed especially positive, the students seemed most motivated to achieve, with high engagement in these classes. Students in these classes were reading and writing all the time:

Put simply, literacy was part of virtually everything that went on in the top three classrooms. When we asked one teacher to estimate what percentage of her students' day was spent actively reading, she replied:

I would say everything we do in here...is so integrated that, to do any activity in here, they need to read something. So I would say for everything we do in here, there is a reading portion. So most of the day...they are immersed in that text! So—well, you just find ways to incorporate it. If *it's* separate, you can be driving along and say, "Oh, I've got to read that sign. So I'd better stop, read the sign, and then go on." It's just there. It's part of your day. And that's how it is in here, too. (Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998, p. 119)

In fact, in these classes, 90% of the time when observers looked around and estimated the percentage of students who were on task, 90% of the students were on task. The high-achieving classrooms were busy classrooms, abuzz with reading and writing activity.

Although all nine teachers combined skills instruction with reading literature and writing, the teachers with the highest achieving students seemed to integrate the skills instruction with the holistic activities better than did the teachers whose students had lower levels of achievement. During the interviews the teachers with high-achieving students were emphatic that neither an exclusive skills orientation nor an exclusive whole-language approach would fit their students well. According to one of the three teachers with the highest achievement, teaching beginning reading is

a fine balance between immersing the child in whole language and teaching through...sounds, going back to using skills. . . . If you don't have a balance, it's kind of like trying to fit a square through a circle. It doesn't work. You don't connect with everyone if you don't use a variety of [teaching] strategies. (Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998, p. 114)

Given the predominance of the whole-language model in upstate New York, we were struck at how open these teachers were about their skills instruction, with two of the three even using basal materials to develop phonics skills in students. In contrast, a teacher in the low-achieving group explained the purpose of her reading groups in this way:

Well, basically, when we read out of the basal books, it's pretty much reading the next story, whatever that may be, and then there are some. . . . workbook pages. . . . The workbook page itself is an assessment of what they read—and how they follow, even down the page. . . . But just orally listening to them read: watching them to see if they're paying attention, following along while others read. You know, you can tell so much just in that short time—how they're coming along." (Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998, p. 116)

What was also striking during every visit to the three most balanced classrooms was the number of skill-oriented mini-lessons. These teachers seemed to monitor their students carefully to detect which ones needed a mini-lesson and when they needed it (e.g., a mini-lesson on the sound “h” makes as a student struggled to spell the word “heart”). Despite the frequency of mini-lessons, these classes never seemed like skills-driven classrooms, because the students were immersed in reading excellent children’s trade books and in writing real stories and essays.

In contrast to the teachers of students with the highest achievement, the other teachers who were observed did not integrate skills instruction and holistic experiences nearly as well. Rather, classrooms seemed to have times set aside for skills teaching and times set aside for reading and writing. For example, in observing classes with lower achievement, the spelling lessons had no later connection to spelling during writing (invented spellings in compositions were accepted, even for words covered in spelling lessons). The connection between skills learning and application in the highest achieving classrooms was not as apparent in the other classrooms observed in this investigation.

Classrooms with the highest achievement always had a great deal going on—in particular, a lot of instruction. Even mundane events, such as filling a stapler, were transformed into lessons in the classrooms with the highest achievement (e.g., the teacher asked students to name the color of the stapler—which was silver, a new vocabulary word for them). In the higher-achieving classrooms, classroom routines, such as dismissal, were transformed into instruction (e.g., by requiring students to spell words to get into the dismissal line). In contrast, instruction was not nearly as much an every-minute thing in first-grade classes with lower achievement. Many more lessons in the higher-achieving classes involved scaffolding; the teacher provided just enough support so the student could begin to make progress on a task but not so much as to be doing the task for the student.

Scaffolding required that the teacher monitor students carefully and consistently. It also required that the teacher thoroughly understood the tasks students were attempting (e.g., having a complete knowledge of phonics to be able to scaffold students’ sounding out words). Scaffolding was everywhere in the high-achieving classrooms and much more prominent in the higher-achieving than the lower-achieving classes.

In the higher-achieving classrooms students were strongly encouraged to do things on their own as much as possible. As children were taught word attack, spelling, and comprehension strategies, they also were taught to use the strategies whenever they were appropriate. When students did self-regulate, teachers with high-achieving classes often noted the self-regulation and reinforced it. Thus, after a boy named Kevin self-corrected himself during reading, his teacher remarked, “When Kevin made a mistake, what did he do? . . . Yes, he went back over it. It’s okay to make mistakes.” Teachers with high-achieving students consistently encouraged students to self-monitor how well they were doing and to make corrections as necessary.

The higher-achieving classrooms revealed a thorough integration of reading and writing. Consistently, students were asked to respond to what they read by writing.

Also, students in the high-achieving classes did a great deal of reading of their own writing, especially their rough drafts, as part of revising. Often, writing assignments required research, so students had to find materials in the library and other places and then read them. Then the students wrote about the topic by incorporating ideas from the materials they found in the library. Projects such as this permitted an integration of reading, writing, and content learning. These crosscurricular connections were prominent in the high-achieving classrooms.

The teachers with high-achieving classes had high expectations that their students could learn and that they could be readers and writers. The effective teachers communicated a "can-do" attitude to their students. Discipline was not a problem in classrooms characterized by high achievement. These teachers had a set of routines for the tasks that were repeated every day, with morning meetings, movement to special classes, and dismissals all taking place efficiently. Clearly, in these classrooms much planning had occurred in advance of the school day, but at the same time these teachers seemed to be able to accommodate flexibly the moment-by-moment needs of their students, many of which were unpredictable (e.g., providing mini-lessons to small groups of students when a need became apparent).

In summary, the strong classrooms in the Wharton-McDonald et al. (1998) study evidenced a balancing of a number of instructional components. Of particular relevance, all the students in the very best classrooms were integrated well into the balanced instruction, with every student receiving both skills instruction and holistic experiences at his or her competency level.

National Study of Grade-1 Teachers

After Wharton-McDonald et al., Pressley et al. (2001; see also Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001) studied a national sample of grade-1 teachers. Again, some teachers were outstanding in promoting achievement of their students and others were less effective. As in Wharton-McDonald et al. (1998), the balancing of skills teaching and holistic instruction was more certain in the strong classrooms than the weaker classrooms.

Also consistent with the Wharton-McDonald et al. (1998) study, much instruction was going on—of letter- and sound-level skills, word recognition skills, vocabulary, comprehension strategies, and writing strategies. And the students were reading excellent literature, literature that expands children's knowledge and understanding of the world. Every child in these classrooms was immersed in this rich multicomponent instructional world, a world in which every child received a balance of skills instruction and holistic experiences appropriate for him or her.

Motivation Studies

Most recently, Pressley and his colleagues had noted that the effective teachers they studied engaged their students in literacy instruction. They did much to motivate students to read and write. Thus, Bogner, Raphael, and Pressley (in press) decided to focus a study of grade-1 literacy instruction on motivation. They observed 7 grade-1 classrooms for a year. Two of these classrooms were distinguished in that their

students were much more engaged in reading and writing than in the other classrooms. The engagement was not accidental, however, for the engaging teachers, compared to the other five teachers, did much to motivate their students. In fact, the two most engaging teachers each used more than 40 different mechanisms to motivate their students to do things literate (Raphael, Bogner, Pressley, Shell, & Masters, 2001), including the following:

- encouraging cooperative learning
- downplaying competition
- holding students accountable for their performances
- projecting high expectations
- scaffolding student learning
- making library and crosscurricular connections to content covered in class
- encouraging autonomy and choice
- having a gentle, caring manner
- interacting with students positively, making home-school connections
- providing opportunistic mini-lessons
- reteaching when students failed to understand the first time
- making personal connections with students
- supporting appropriate risk-taking
- making the classroom fun
- encouraging creative and independent thinking by students.

The classrooms of the two really engaging teachers were distinguished by interesting content and tasks, appropriately challenging material, and depth of coverage. The really engaging teachers also presented abstract content personally and concretely, had clear learning objectives, used effective praise and feedback, modeled thinking and problem-solving skills, encouraged stick-with-it-ness, and explained the relevance of what was being taught. The engaging teachers encouraged their students to believe they could achieve their goals with effort. Their classroom management was superb, so good that disciplinary events rarely occurred and were hardly noticeable when they did. The engaging teachers always knew what every member of the class was doing and intervened when students seemed puzzled or were not making progress.

One of the exemplary teachers from the nationwide study of effective first-grade literacy instruction (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, et al., 2001) came from a district that implemented the Reading Recovery program. Reading Recovery is an early intervention program used typically with first-grade students who are making slow progress in learning to read in the general classroom (Lyons, Pinnell, & DeFord, 1993). Students are taken out of the classroom for a half hour daily for the one-to-one tutoring that is Reading Recovery.

These sessions follow a structured format, balancing phonics with strategy instruction during scaffolded reading and writing. The tutoring can continue for as long as a semester. The exemplary teacher, who had been trained as a Reading

Recovery tutor, was incorporating into her classroom teaching many of the instructional practices and strategies of Reading Recovery.

That this one teacher incorporated so much of Reading Recovery into classroom instruction prompted Roehrig, Pressley, and Sloup (2001) to explore how other teachers in the same district were transferring into their classrooms what they had learned as Reading Recovery tutors. Ten primary-level teachers were observed over the course of two years. Again, the method of constant comparison was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in the iterative process of data collection and analysis. Teachers with more training and experience in Reading Recovery were more likely to use the instructional practices and teach the strategies emphasized in Reading Recovery in their general classroom instruction, and their instruction seemed more like the instruction of exemplary teachers in the earlier studies (Roehrig et al., in press). In particular, the literacy instruction of these teachers was a complex balance of direct instruction, often in the form of mini-lessons and in the context of authentic reading and writing activities, with the teachers being particularly sensitive to the competencies of each student and the scaffolding necessary for development of self-regulation.

As this article is being published, Sara Dolezal, Lindsey Mohan, Melissa Vincent, and Michael Pressley are carrying out a similar analysis at the grade-3 level. The preliminary results are similar: The minority of grade-3 teachers are really engaging, and the engaging teachers are doing much to motivate their students relative to the less engaging teachers.

The Pressley group has generated a great deal of research establishing that excellent elementary instruction entails a complex balancing of a number of components including both skills-based and holistic tasks. Also, much goes on to encourage students' will to learn, to encourage their engagement in literacy-development tasks, especially real reading and writing.

WELL VALIDATED COMPONENTS OF BALANCED ELEMENTARY LITERACY INSTRUCTION

If the results described in the last section have not been received positively by those who are strongly committed to skills instruction or whole language, they have been received enthusiastically by many others who recognize that effective instruction must include multiple components. Even so, for the most part, literacy researchers have concerned themselves with particular elements of instruction as they have carried out research on effective practice. This is consistent with the true experiment being a high ideal for establishing a cause-and-effect relationship between an instructional practice and an educational outcome (National Reading Panel, 2000).

True experiments lend themselves well to evaluating individual components of instruction. In fact, the many true experiments and quasi-experiments focusing on reading instruction have provided a great deal of information about components that can be added to instruction with benefit. (Quasi-experiments involve comparisons